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O 090946Z MAY 06
FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4537
INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0856
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 9631
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 4144
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1600
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 3325
RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 6726
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 4340
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 0733
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0734
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0380
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 2665
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0308
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000624

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/08/2016

TAGS: [PINS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [PREF](#) [BM](#)

SUBJECT: FOOD SHORTAGES AND ROADWORK IN NORTHERN KAREN

REF: A. RANGOON 603

[B](#). RANGOON 591

[C](#). RANGOON 521

RANGOON 00000624 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: Vice Consul Walter Parrs III for Reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#). (C) Summary: A recent trip to Taungoo near northern Karen State provided a new dimension to the ongoing conflict between the GOB and the Karen National Union (KNU). The GOB has halted all transportation of food and other goods into the area of northern Karen, resulting in food shortages in Karen villages and the threat of starvation. However, army activity appears almost non-existent along the only access route into the conflict area. The most significant activity we observed were preparations for large-scale road upgrades from Taungoo east towards the Thai border. This may indicate that efforts to secure trade routes have led to recent conflicts with the Karen. End Summary.

[2](#). (C) On May 5, Emboffs traveled by car to Taungoo, a town of 200,000 situated in Bago Division just west of the area of northern Karen State embroiled in recent conflict. There, we met with local religious leaders who described how GOB roadblocks prevent food from entering northern Karen State, imposing hardships on Karen villages. For the past two months, the leaders claim a GOB checkpoint four miles east of Taungoo has stopped all transportation of rice, salt, and other goods from entering Karen State. Burmese Army (BA) soldiers inspect the contents of all vehicles passing through the checkpoint and confiscate any food destined for Karen villages. Sympathizers in Taungoo try to cross the checkpoint with concealed rice, or to circumvent the checkpoints altogether by carrying rice in on foot. The road east from Taungoo provides the only access to the conflict area.

¶3. (C) Local contacts in Taungoo said they had seen no evidence of either a major GOB offensive or strikes by the KNU against the BA. Nonetheless, BA units continue to debilitate Karen villages through forced relocations and the supply cutoff, a standard BA strategy to weaken the support network of guerrilla KNU soldiers. Father Phomin of the Taungoo Catholic Diocese expressed fears that the supply blockade will take a greater toll when the monsoon season begins in June, forcing villagers to Thailand in search of sustenance.

All's Quiet on the Western Front

¶4. (C) We observed a notable lack of military activity or presence in the Taungoo region, even though it provides the only access to the conflict area. We observed no military convoys, no movement of injured troops out of the conflict zone, and no supply trucks heading in. We heard some reports of injured civilians and soldiers arriving at the Taungoo hospital, but no descriptions of large amounts of casualties. Local sources also dispelled rumors of Karen villagers fleeing west into Bago Division. Occasional villagers come down from the hills in search of food, but they return after a few hours or days, explained one contact.

¶5. (C) While military activity appears quiet around Taungoo, the GOB has made major preparations for road construction across northern Karen. We traveled along a fifteen mile stretch of the road entering northern Karen, and observed five or six active stone grinding stations preparing material for road construction. The large amount of building material already prepared indicates a large scale roadwork project, likely designed to reach all the way to the Thai border.

¶6. (C) Comment: The apparent lack of troops or supply operations at the mouth of the only access route to the

RANGOON 00000624 002.2 OF 002

conflict zone supports separate reporting that the GOB's military operation is something less than a major offensive (refs A-C). Cutting food supplies certainly shows hostile intent. The plans to build a major new road through the area add an interesting dimension to recent skirmishes, however, indicating that current conflict may be more about establishing a secure trade route between Thailand and the new capital at Pyinmana than about finally quashing the KNU. End comment.
VILLAROSA